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AUTHOR Grogg, Sam L., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Although film and television education have been a part of the core university curriculum for almost two decades, the nature of instruction has been characterized and developed according to the interests of individual faculties, rather than by any collective understanding of a required body of basic knowledge. If film education is to be recognized as a distinct part of the arts and humanities, thereby qualifying for funding, administrative support, and allotted time for the pursuit of definitive research, the following changes in the field seem essential: increased communication within the field resulting in a sense of shared identity and purpose; a professional commitment to the field as a separate discipline; specific faculty development and inservice teacher training; the establishment of a working relationship with the film industry and the professional organizations that represent its interests; and cooperation with the academic bureaucracy of the university in establishing certification and credibility without compromising creativity and freedom. (MAI)

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THE GROWTH AND DIVERSITY OF SCREEN EDUCATION: ISSUES AND ANSWERS

by

Sam L. Grogg, Jr.
Director,
National Education Services
The American Film Institute

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I frequently find myself chanting a statistical litany profiling the growth and diversity of screen education in our country. The chant goes with the job and I tend to rely on it as an easy explanation of what I've done and a nagging reminder for what I yet have to do. But like all chanting, little attention is really paid to the meaning behind the oft repeated phrases. The numbers are well known. In fact, they reverberate in bits and pieces throughout the papers which have been prepared for this conference. I have a feeling, though, that the same involuntary singsong use of the figures as easy starting points or convenient summaries is generally the reason for their appearance.

But I am not going to chant here. I am, however, going to try and direct attention to the meaning of the statistical litany that describes our endeavors. Rather than pick a total here and there that fits nicely with a certain point or conclusion I'd like to make, I want to focus the early deliberations of this unique gathering on attempting to form a truly comprehensive appreciation of the actual dimensions of film and video study at our colleges and universities. For while each of us has been given a puzzle piece to try and fit into the overall goals of this meeting, a disciplinary definition of the various academic dealings in film will be valid only

if it emanates from a full awareness of the incredible complexity which characterizes American screen education.

We seem to have a tough time facing the facts of our amorphous territory in the higher education system. Last winter, Howard Suber, Don Staples, Dennis Bohnenkamp, and myself (all seasoned chanters) formed a panel at the annual Society for Cinema Studies meeting. We had convened to present the most recent research describing the goings on in film and video study and training. We realized going in that the subject was exciting only in the most ascetic of terms, and we expected the usual cool and disinterested audience reactions. There were a few questions, one or two comments, a laugh, some quick applause and it was over.

When confronted with the statistical demographics of the realm in which they work, film and video academics tend to either nod in sage reverence or stare coldly with a look of "lying with statistics" disbelief. Either way, the general attitude is one of an impatient desire to get on with things. The totals are dismissed out of awe or disregard. But one reaction seems to have become more and more apparent during these recent displays of numbers. Talk of the vast diversity and expanse of filmmaker training and film scholar preparation is to many a vivid chronicle of sham and illegitimate instruction carried on by unqualified interlopers. This reaction is what has brought this group together.

There is no doubt that the world of film and video study is a factionalized one. I often feel that I continually travel among feudal kingdoms where the laws change according to abitrary decisions of academic lords and their courts. Each of the kingdoms has its own way of doing things and views reports of differing activities with a horror accorded to only the most blatant act of heresy. In some places, the training of filmmakers takes cues from the industrial film industry and the needs for educational and training films. Other schools maintain a penchant for the more personal, independent filmmaking along with a smattering of documentary interest. And here the presence of the theatrical film industry provides much of the motivation and context of the academic endeavors. The only common bond among these broad jurisdictions is probably limited to the use of 16mm film stock and maybe a few other pieces of basic hardware.

The major problem facing this group and the major hindrance to achieving the goal of this conference is one of simple communication. I hardly expect all of us to understand the curricular activities of one another, but at the very least there must be an effort to deal with the inability of this field to share even the most basic information. Film and video higher education is plagued with a troublesome eclecticism that has its faculties, students, and technicians all speaking different versions of the same language, approaching the same subject matter from widely divergent directions, and continually resisting any moves to provide them with a sense of commonality.

The academic consideration of film has been developing in this country for nearly forty years, but within the last two decades the growth of serious study has picked up momentum to the point that it exists as a given in the core university curriculum. Circumstance, however, has always tended to shape the nature of the instruction of young filmmakers or scholars. Curricula in film and video education have, for the most part, been characterized and developed by the interests of individual faculty rather than any collective understanding of a required body of basic knowledge.

A number of individuals attending this meeting can speak proudly of major programs in film production and studies which they have quite literally built out of the barest administrative sustenance. Their personalized stamp has provided both the primary motivation and the major determining force behind the growth and development of U.S. film education. We owe much to these individuals and we pay respect their contributions each time we gather like this, referring to Wagner's shop, Suber's group, Mackendrick's outfit, and so on. But we are now at the point in the development of this area of academic pursuit when the issues facing us necessarily transcend individual interests. This does not mean that we must immediately revere automated homogeneity (the utter fear of those who recognize accreditation and standards as hoary monsters dedicated to bleeding us all of our imagination and creativity), but that there must be some sense of shared identity and purpose if we are to mature as a form of higher learning and professional training.

First of all, we must all realize, regardless of where, why, or how often we teach film and video, that we are only barely considered to be an "official" area of subject matter interest in the educational spectrum. For instance, The National Center for Educational Statistics which provides the "reality" for any administrative decisions in the Office of Education has only recently included film and television on its records.

There is a log of what is considered the extent of subject matter areas studied in the schools of our country which forms the skeletal structure for all information and ideas necessary to curriculum planning and development. This Handbook of Subject Matter Taxonomy is the guide to most administrative decisions and policy recommendations within the educational "establishment." Until this month there was a single category listing for what interests the people in this room--"cinematography." Now there are a few more categories, but still the listings just begin to approach the realities and interests represented by the schools represented here.

The significance of our lack of "official" identity can not be ignored. Policy papers, handbooks, legislation, etc. all directly determine the environment in which we must attempt to seek funding, administrative support, and curricular legitemacy. The diversity of our voices has left us sounding like a disorganized din rather than a confident clarion call. We may have managed to get our various campus structures to listen to our needs and goals, but larger institutional systems

simply do not know what to do with us. This field has as its most urgent challenge gaining continued and full recognition within the official bodies which determine education policy in the United States.

The diversity of interests in our field has also been an almost immoveable barrier to the pursuit of research and definitive scholarship. With study being conducted in an incredibly mixed array of departments representing nearly every academic discipline imaginable, the chances that a researcher knows his or her area of interest with confident completeness is highly suspect. A recent meeting of leading humanists dealing in the critical study of film pointed out not only a woeful lack of familiarity with the basics of theatrical film production, but also only cursory knowledge of the work of their colleagues. At one point the meeting had to be swerved from its planned agenda to give the group an opportunity to talk among itself just to update the common research interests that existed.

Significant inquiry into cinema and video is being carried out in the absence of any commonly shared communication system that might allow research to advance rather than rework familiar territory and explore already well-worn theories and ideas. The discovery of stereotypical images of blacks in films of the forties or of the striking use of angle in the cinema of Orson Welles are best left unrepeated. With so much yet to investigate and understand about the nature of film and video,

there must be developed a means by which researchers and scholars can have regular and immediate access to one another's work. Libraries and information systems must be encouraged (again, by a unified voice) to store and disseminate film/video research in a manner which allows for the eclectic approach of today and tomorrow's cinema scholars. Valiant attempts have been and are being made to deal with this aspect of our field, but we need even more in the way of basic research tools, bibliographies, abstracts, union catalogues, resource guides, and directories. And all must consider as realistically as possible the full spectrum of film and video study rather than some artificially stratified sampling of material.

Of course the key to obtaining the kind of dedicated perseverance necessary to building the fundamental blocks of the structure of cinema study is being continually compromised by the priorities of the individuals involved in it. The bulk of cinema study, and a fair amount of film production, being conducted in higher education is in the hands of newly arrived disciples who have yet to really give up their old religions. The historians, literary scholars, philosophers, linguists, artists, social scientists, and others who are producing vast quantities of our field's literature have little or no real professional committment to the field in which they publish. When they are pressed, their allegiance to the professional organizations and institutions of the fields in

which they originally studied is always unshakable. English teachers in film return like swallows to the confines of the Modern Language Association. Historians resignedly trek to the American Historical Association. But very seldom do these very enthusiastic film scholars opt for a meeting or oganization which devotes itself solely to film and video interests. I understand the frustration over the presence of "interlopers" in film and video education, but even that would not be so bad if once they moved in they became permanent residents. The scholarship of this field needs the lively breath of new minds, but it also needs the continuity that comes only with complete professional committment.

The problem of faculty development must be faced with less haphazard and superficial attention. There should be a major rethinking of the entire progression that leads an individual to faculty status in our field. Given the tendency to draw our faculty from other disciplines, there is a felt dependency on "in-service" teacher training whereby snatches of the special methods and skills necessary to film and video instruction and periodically picked up at a summer workshop or at conference sessions presenting the experiences of those who have been in the trenches a little longer. But the bulk of these teacher preparatory activities are still highly informal and mostly left to improvisation.

There is no coordinated program for teaching the teachers of our field. Schools of education have yet to include film and video study as "certifiable" teaching areas in any other than the most elemental instructional technology sense. To us liberally oriented college-level faculty, the reference to the "education establishment" usually tends to make the skin crawl. But much of the future of screen education will depend on fully integrating it into the realm of standard public education.

This may all sound very bureaucratic, but the reality as I see it and deal with it daily is that we must infiltrate education at all levels if we are to truly obtain our goals. Other disciplines have managed to embrace the web of orthodox education and still maintain their creative aspects and the freedom of inquiry which determines their development. In fact, their recognition of the formal structures and the reliance upon them has provided a base of leverage that has influenced policies that would otherwise only be impatiently endured.

Our estrangement from the education bureaucracy renders us powerless to deal with major changes in the crucial area of federal funding for education. For instance, the support of major programs in media education which was generous during the late 1960's and early 1970's is long past. First there was the economic slow-down of the mid seventies which was felt by all aspects of education. Then came the concern for re-establishing a traditional curriculum which emphasized basic

mathematical and verbal skills. Now we are at a point where the education policy of this country is being reevaluated and legislative programs are being developed that will determine our future. We have little voice at present in the formulation of any of these decisions.

Every recent study or position paper dealing with the future of arts education has treated film and video study as, at most, an afterthought. Committee after committee are being formed to plan major national events such as the White House Conference on the Arts and Humanities. The input from our field is woefully lacking. It certainly is not representative of the majority of interests gathered in this room. "Who speaks for you?" we are asked, and we do not have the answer.

Neither can we respond to similar queries from the professional and artistic community which provides us with the primary objects of our study. Bernard Baron, Vide-President for Studio Operations for Twentieth Century-Fox, asked recently, "Where are the leaders of this industry going to come from in the next decade? We cannot go on depending on luck. All of those schools out there and we don't know what they do, nor do they have any idea of what we need."

The relationship between screen academia and screen industry has long been a confusing mixture of ignorance and mistrust on both sides. The filmmakers are resources for training our students in terms of real experience and for

providing our studies with primary evidence. Yet we have yet to find a reliable way to make them at home in our world or for us to be comfortable with theirs.

Stronger and stronger ties must be established with the organizations which represent the interests of the professional film community. Guilds, unions, producer's organizations, academies, and so on all have a vested interest in the activities of film schools. Likewise, the film academy must create a rapport with the sources of the films, videotapes, scripts, records, and individuals which make up the fabric of cinema in our society. And this can only be accomplished with a common acknowledgement of the sanctity of this relationship and a respect for insuring that it is preserved and developed to mutual interest.

It may sound as if I am arguing for a universal complicity on the part of film educators and whomever and whatever might influence their livelihood. There is nothing here intended to be construed as asking for the relinquishment of our academic integrity. What I am suggesting is the dissolving of a feudal mentality which prevents us from fully exploring our multifaceted interests. Our diversity and sudden growth has been both exciting and overwhelming. But it has also been the most singular obstacle to fulfilling the promise of screen education.

This conference is dealing with the worth of standards and definition in the field of film and video training and scholarship. The fears of accreditation and standardization

have already surfaced in preparation for the meeting. I have no stomach for the stagnate evils of rote guidelines determining what ought to be studied and how. But I know that unless we find our voice, we will never be able to call foul or yell for help. We must find a way to preserve our diversity, but also to create for ourselves a collective identity that will be acknowledged and respected by all those who might affect our sphere of inquiry. Then and only then will we be in control of our destiny as in academic, artistic, or professional discipline.